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Commodity Feminism

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This article concerns women's images in ads, their responses to those images, and advertisers' methods of managing these responses. Feminist discourses have been rerouted in the mass media according to the logic of commodity relations. Rather than fight the legitimacy of feminist discourse, advertisers have attempted to channel key aspects of that discourse into semiotic markers that can be attached to commodity brands. In today's crowded corporate marketplace where it is imperative to differentiate brandnames from those of competitors, advertisers compete at translating women's discourses into stylized commodity signs. Though at first glance this may appear as evidence of a new era of democratic cultural pluralism, we argue that the many faces of feminism appearing in women's magazines are a single aspect of an internally contradictory hegemonic process—an ongoing dialectic between dominant and oppositional discourse.

This article explores the reframing of feminist discourse with a close reading of advertisements in the September 1987 issue of Mademoiselle. This essay draws attention to the ideological contradictions of the hegemonic process in the mass media. Theoretically, we have situated our analysis of the management of ideological difference in advertising in terms of the commodity framework which structures discourse in the mass media, hence, the term commodity feminism.

In the culture industry, feminism and femininity have come to represent a range of strategies for capturing market share. We discuss the contextual backdrop of producing the "audience as a commodity," to give a sense of what motivates the appropriation and reframing of feminist discourse in women's advertisements. Commodity feminism is market motivated: The commodity self that emerges from the totality of advertisements is the flip side of demographic profiles and the selling of audience segments. Our decomposition and interrogation of the advertising texts in this Mademoiselle aims at rearticulating the ideological tensions concealed by the advertising and commodity forms. We seek to repoliticize the depoliticized, bringing back into the picture the social and economic relations that are absent in the ads.

Advertisements are vehicles for commodity narratives (see Williamson, 1978). The stories they tell about self-identity are invariably structured by the ideological logic of the commodity form (see Goldman & Wilson, 1983). For decades now, these

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Commodity narratives have addressed subjects about desire—most often about the desire for self-identity, whether it is the desire to be a good mom or the desire for flawless golden hair or the desire for respect, etc. For most women, interpreting these narratives depends on a taken-for-granted familiarity with the codes of patriarchy, along with a sense of commodity logic that has become second nature. Commodity logic consists of a series of interpretive maneuvers where we abstract a desired relationship out of a lived context, then place it into a formal, binary equivalence with a product image, and then associate the desire in terms of its object substitute—fetishism.

The spectator-buyer is meant . . . to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself (Berger, 1972, p. 134).

Such advertising, grounded in a circuit of envy and desire, has been so pervasive that analysts have usually failed to notice that the combination of viewer alienation and the popular legitimacy of feminist discourse has led to the emergence of a more reflexive advertising style in the latter 1980s as advertisers have experimented with aesthetic variations on the male gaze and with how ads address and position the female spectator.

An asymmetrical correspondence has been established over the years between women's direct experience of struggles and contradictions in everyday life and how their lives are represented in the mass media. The latter process of appropriation and renaming has become no less a part of the historical circumstances that condition consciousness than the home, the workplace and the public space devoted to consumption. A majority of women now work for wages, but still do most of the shopping—turning the family's wages into the material and social reproduction of the family unit. It is thus noteworthy that in the midst of 1980s' marketing efforts to turn the discourse of feminism into hard currency, the term “postfeminism” took hold to refer to a new generation of women who took for granted the victories secured by their elders, presuming their right to equitable treatment both in the workplace and at home, while shunning the label of feminism. Critics charged that postfeminism “describes the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism” (Stacey, 1987, p. 8). We see an ideological resemblance between postfeminism and the commercial blends of feminism and beauty counseling that have recently been constructed in the mass media. Commercial attempts to choreograph a non-contradictory unification of feminism and femininity have given rise to an aesthetically depoliticized feminism.

Pop feminist criticism of advertising mounted throughout the 1980s, and as it did, advertisers attempted to reincorporate the cultural power of feminism, while domesticating its critique of sexist mass media. There is nothing new in entrepreneurs trying to appropriate the legitimacy of a popular oppositional social movement and transforming those meanings into symbolic currency—by now we are all witness to scores of ads that feature glib ideological grafts of feminist rationality onto the assumptions of consumerism. In the early 1980s, a common advertising strategy for validating an image of the “new woman” defined as independent and equal to men involved a subtle reframing of the “male gaze”, shifting the power in
such a relationship from the surveyor to the surveyed. An ideology of envy, desire and power has always been present in the way ads objectify the female body (see Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975). Since the late 1970s, advertisers have reframed the logic of the fetishized look—the more recent scenario purports to reclaim the female body as a site for women’s own pleasure and as a resource for her power in a broader marketplace of desire than marriage. The formula, though self-contradictory, can be expressed quite simply: Self-fetishization supposedly offers women an avenue to empowerment. But the continuous process of advertising based on fetishizing women’s bodies has taken its toll as it has made women feel inadequate. Marketing surveys have taken note that a growing proportion of female viewers have grown antagonistic to the uninterrupted procession of perfect, but unattainable looks that daily confront them. Women don’t have to be feminists to feel oppressed by images of perfection and beauty that batter and bruise self-esteem—by the late 1980s, the dynamic of envy and desire between the advertising text and the viewer had swung out of control and growing numbers of alienated women viewers were frustrated by idealized definitions of feminine desirability that were always just beyond reach. This, of course, was initially the whole point. Wolf (1991, p. 42–43) points out that as “the Feminine Mystique evaporated, all that was left was the body.” “The beauty myth” in this incarnation emerged “to save magazines and advertisers from the economic fallout of the women’s revolution.” But by the mid 1980s, this earlier solution to the crisis of sustaining commodity consumption had begun to exhaust itself, and it became imperative once again to reengage the angry and alienated viewer.

The joke’s on you if your body image is bad. Drop that obsolete obsession with trying to reshape yourself. Accept (and enhance) what you’ve got, regardless of any less-than-model-marvelous imperfections and make your body your buddy, not your enemy (Mademoiselle, September, 1987, p. 258).

This passage demonstrates an awareness that readers might reject sexist representations of the female body, but the pro-feminist exhortations about self-acceptance are embedded in discourses about diet, exercise, and scientifically formulated creams that still locate the problem in the attitudes of individual women, and not in the basic structural relations that condition women’s lives—certainly not in the unequal conditions of commodity production and consumption.

**COMMODITY FEMINISM/FETISHISM**

Women’s magazines in the later 1980s have touted an apparent detente between femininity and feminism. Since the early 1970s, advertisers have tried to connect the value and meaning of women’s emancipation to corporate products.

Femininity is recuperated by the capitalist form: the exchange between the commodity and ‘woman’ in the ad establishes her as a commodity too . . . it is the modes of femininity themselves which are achieved through commodities and are replaced by commodities (Winship, 1980, p. 218).
Since then, feminism has been similarly recuperated. Women’s magazines attempt to redefine feminism through commodities, interpreting the everyday relations women encounter and negotiate into a series of “attitudes” which they can then “wear.” Advertisers carve out differentiated image niches for their products by competing at translating women’s discourse back to women themselves as spectators. In the context of fragmented demographic categories and fragmented consumer markets, feminism takes on a plurality of faces in the mass media, its potentially alternative ideological force thus channeled through the commodity form in ways that may modify patriarchal hegemony, but bow to capitalist hegemony. Feminist morality, including the tensions it contains, has been turned into yet another raw material in the never-ending drive to expand or renew the commodity—sign values of consumer goods. Feminism is reduced to the status of a mere signifier or signified, so that it may be re-encoded by an advertiser as a sequence of visual cliches and reified signifiers, i.e., it can be worn as a stylish sign. In this way, feminism has now been rehabilitated for the world of advertising—its primary meanings taken over by the system of fashion, and some of its most important alternative formulations translated back into the language of the Western male ethic of possessive individualism (see Macpherson, 1962). Change, in these representations, has no referent in the time and space of history, but is simply a marker of novelty, or difference, represented in fetishized form by special commodities. Commodity feminism elides the social dimension which conditions the contradictions experienced in daily life. Feminism becomes “depoliticized” as ads turn “feminist social goals to individual life-style” (Rapp, 1988, p. 32). When framed by ideologies of possessive individualism and free choice, feminism in its ‘new’ commodity form forgets its origins in a critique of unequal social, economic and political relations.

We’ve chosen the pun, commodity feminism, because commodity relations turn the relations of acting subjects into relations between objects. Turning feminism into a commodity value fetishizes feminism. When appropriated by advertisers and editors, feminism has been cooked to distill out a residue—an object: a look, a style. Women’s discourses are relocated and respoken by these named objects (e.g., Hanes hose, Nike shoes, Esprit Jeans). Such sign-objects are thus made to stand for (or made equivalent to) feminist goals of independence and professional success. Personality can be expressed, and relationships achieved, through personal consumer choices.

The motor force of commodity culture rests on the practice of joining otherwise disparate meaning systems to generate new sign-values. The pun furnishes an easy and efficient method of joining meanings by simultaneously differentiating, collapsing and recombining meanings of at least two referent systems. The pun’s motion invites readers to realize double meanings and thereby creates a new meaning for a product look or fashion style. Commodity feminism embodies the process of punning used to double and join the meanings of feminism and femininity. In today’s marketplace, the identity of a magazine or a commodity is conditional on its sign-difference from other such products. Marketers call this “positioning.” Commodity culture sets up binary semiotic oppositions (see Brown, 1987) and editors, marketers and advertisers compete to combine the difference between these binary
oppositions [feminism/not femininity] and [femininity/not feminism] in order to establish differentiated commodity signs (e.g., Esprit/“neo-feminism”) that will stand out and be recognized in crowded marketplaces.

‘FEMININITY,’ ‘FEMINISM’ AND MARKET SHARE

Mass-circulation magazines like Mademoiselle, Glamour, Vogue and SELF promote commodity practices, relations and exchanges wherever possible. A glance across the magazine covers in the supermarket checkout line reminds us that no part of our lives escapes the corporate formula of commodified solutions for needs—e.g., 17 ways to beat stress; get your rear in gear—5 firm moves; $00 looks for love and work. Every item, like the ads inside, hails the individual reader, either explicitly by naming “YOU”, or by implying the you and letting readers fill it in for themselves. The magazines proclaim themselves as the voice of expertise—addressing us in both an imperative voice as well as that of an intimate friend engaging us in personal dialogue.

The mass media compose visual signs by joining, mixing and juxtaposing the meanings of femininity and feminism as referent systems. The visual abbreviations used to produce signs gradually eclipse the original referent systems. Visual signs focus meaning intensively, but do so at a price of cultural reductivism. In view of all that is glossed over and forgotten in this sign production process, let us re–elaborate femininity and feminism as conceptual categories.

Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual availability on male terms. What defines women as such is what turns men on (MacKinnon, 1982, pp. 530–531).

Feminists reject femininity as status and strategy, in favor of gender equity and autonomy from male-defined sexuality. Feminist values include self-definition, control over one’s body and personal freedom (see Russo, 1987, p. 104).

Advertising has evolved both a distinctive iconography and mode of address towards women (Goffman, 1976; Williamson, 1978; Ewen & Ewen, 1982; Marchand, 1985). Advertising has articulated a vocabulary of visual signifiers which define the meaningful universe of femininity. Goffman (1976) specified the gestures and poses used to signify “femininity” in ads—e.g., licensed withdrawal (a wispy, self-absorbed aura) or the touch. Questions of femininity have been laminated with consumerism’s array of significations. The mass media signify femininity by visually emphasizing the line and curve of the female body along with a code of poses, gestures, body cant and gazes. This visual lexicon has become so familiar that we now accept the signer, e.g., the closeup curve of a calf or the hip or an ear lobe, to stand for the feminine. Femininity has become widely synonymous with the intensive scrutiny of the signifiers created by this visual dissection of the female body into zones of consumption—lips, eyes, nails, hair, cheekbones, breasts, hips, waist, legs.

To signify feminism, on the other hand, advertisers assemble signs which connote independence, participation in the work force, individual freedom, and self-control. Commodity feminism presents feminism as a style—a semiotic abstraction—a set of visual sign values that say who you are. Since the early 1970s when Virginia Slims
and Revlon began to capitalize on changing attitudes among women, marketers have become more attentive to what women want to hear about themselves.

By now, the housewife/mother is a despised figure—most despised by actual housewife/mothers... Since these viewers now prefer to see themselves represented as executives, or at least as mothers with beepers and attache cases, the hausfrau of the past... has largely been obliterated by advertisers (Miller, 1988, p. 50).

A generation after the women’s movement scored victories with anti-discrimination suits, advertisers routinely address women, and their daughters, in a voice which acknowledges changed expectations for women. The magazine industry now carefully tracks the demographic paths and attitudes of women as a method of positioning their products to target audiences. Mademoiselle owner, Condé Nast, is a corporate conglomerate which calls itself “a family of magazines”—a family whose members are defined by market analysis. Surveys supplemented by focus group research guide efforts at corporate disassembling and reassembling women into audience packages to be sold to advertisers. Marketers can no longer confine themselves to asking simply “what do women consumers want” but rather, “how do we address the ‘target audience women’?”

Advertisers’ efforts to bridge the ideological distance between feminism and femininity generate new ideological contradictions. Meanings of choice and individual freedom become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their liberated interests. The female body has been reframed as the locus of freedom as well as sexual pleasure. A tacit theoretical concept of individual freedom of choice lies at the center of commodity feminism. The commercial marriage of feminism and femininity plays off a conception of personal freedom located in the visual construction of self-appearance. Body and sexuality emerge as coincidental signs: The body is something you shape, control and dress to validate yourself as an autonomous being capable of will power and discipline; and sexuality appears as something women exercise by choice rather than because of their ascribed gender role. The “properly shaped” female body is taken as evidence of achievement and self-worth. Magazine editors and “experts” endlessly counsel that achieving this body freedom is a significant personal accomplishment, requiring sustained acts of goal-directed will power.

But these scenarios still present objectified female sexuality (the appearance given off by carefully tended body parts) as a personal achievement. Personal strength (physical or social) which can be seen as an avenue to female independence, a feminist goal, is repeatedly refigured as a means to attaining sexual attractiveness. Self-acceptance is ostensibly the key to a happier life, a means of vanquishing the forces of oppression—male domination and the institutionalized world of production relations—which are invariably absent in these texts. The means of achieving this confidence and strength is to be found in commodified body images.

This new way of viewing you is celebrated by the slew of body-flaunting clothes around now: bodacious bodices, slinky knits, no-limit hemlines. Go on, dare to wear these sumptuously unselfconscious duds—and carry yourself like you mean it! (Mademoiselle, September, 1987, p. 258).
And what’s more, commodity feminism offers ‘you’ the choice of which body to pursue your freedom in. Ads such as that for Bonjour jeans tout voluptuous, hardbody curves, while ads like that for Levi’s 900s imply new recognition for women (“These Levi’s jeans aren’t fit for any man”). Yet, while Levi’s written text purports to de-privilege men, the photograph accentuates not rounded hips but a narrow straight line through the hips. The visual text blurs sexual and gender boundaries—a move towards androgyny by re-privileging a male shape that is now just for women. Women can now have their own male shape, made especially for them. No matter which choice you make, your body is the key to your freedom of self-expression.

CONSTRUCTING AND ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCE AS COMMODITY

Before turning to the ads themselves, we should consider the trade publications which market readers to media buyers (agency and client professionals). Advertising Age traffics in the pictorial flip side of turning women into commodities. They foreground what is usually background or subtext: the political economy of consumer product advertising as it conditions editorial and advertising messages in women’s magazines.

Women’s magazines flourished as vehicles for advertising messages in the mid 1980s. Mademoiselle, for example, expanded its total advertising pages in 1987 to its highest total since 1948. Women’s magazines compete for advertising revenue by routinely delivering demographically identified segments of the women’s market. When women buy a women’s magazine, they become part of a ‘package’ the magazine has sold to companies that advertise in its pages. Using images of femininity and feminism combined with explicit descriptions of purchasing power, household income, age and lifestyle characteristics, women’s magazines make their pitch to potential advertisers in the pages of Advertising Age and other trade journals.

Ads for women’s magazines regularly appear in Advertising Age to position their “product”: the woman reader/consumer. The key commodity sold here is an audience of women (Smythe, 1977). A two-page ad for SELF magazine in Advertising Age (March 7, 1988 pp. 30–31) features a young woman reclining against a white background. Across the top, the caption reads “HEALTHY, WEALTHY, and WISE.” The woman’s body is photographically segmented into three corresponding zones, each clothed and accessorized to signify the different spheres of consumption in her life. Hiking boots, wool socks and jeans on her feet and legs signify a healthy outdoors lifestyle. This is spliced to a photo of her mid-section clothed in nylonos, a red satin dress, and silver bracelets on her sun-tanned arm—all signifiers of a woman of means and sensuality. From the shoulders up she wears a business—like black and white dress, accessorized with gold jewelry, pen in hand, and glasses lying in front of her on an open magazine. This offers a carefully constructed visual representation of marketers’ compartmentalized vision of young women.

Does a magazine that purports to speak from a feminist perspective market itself any differently to readers and advertisers? The following pitch was aimed at readers in MS. The text overlays a customary soft-focus image of a stylish young woman.
GIVE THE JOYOUS NEW SPIRIT OF MS
The Ms. of the future is here. Now.
A joyous celebration of women.
Fresh new features.
Gloria Steinem regularly.
Finding your own style.
Innovations. Passions.
Adventures. Travel.
Work and play.
Living and Loving.
It’s unlike anything else (November 19, 1987, p. 64).

Here, MS. tries to mirror back to its readers the postfeminist sensibilities that marketing surveys have apparently ferreted out. Here we see the semiotic reductionism of political discourse into lifestyle ingredients. Is it accidental that the joyous new “Geist” of MS. is defined by a string of signifiers, and virtually no verbs, much less active verbs? Compare this to how MS. made its pitch to advertisers where the motive for postfeminism is buying power.

WHAT DO YOU CALL A WOMAN WHO’S MADE IT TO THE TOP? MS.

She’s a better prospect than ever. Because we’ve turned the old Ms. upside down to reflect how women are living today. And you’re going to love the results. The new Ms. is witty and bold, with a large-size format that’s full of surprises. Whether it’s money, politics, business, technology, clothing trends, humor or late-breaking news—it’s up-to-the-minute, it’s part of the new Ms. So if you want to reach the top women consumers in America, reach for the phone . . .

THE NEW MS. AS IMPRESSIVE AS THE WOMAN WHO READS IT (Advertising Age
(March 7, 1988, p. 57).

Pictorially, the new MS. woman is literally turned on her head. In ostensibly a lighthearted moment she reclines over a couch so that a collection of identifiable items spill from her pockets. These include a passport; Tictac breath mints; a child’s drawing; calculator; keys; American Express Card; perfume atomizer; gold charm bracelet; a crumpled $100 bill; Anacin; and a business card. This collection of material artifacts signifies the mix of interests and accomplishments of the ‘new 80s women’ who look to MS. for direction. Each significant relation is encoded in commodity-object form.

Though MS. is usually cast as the ideological opposite of Helen Gurley Brown’s Cosmopolitan, they sell themselves to media buyers in the same way. Cosmopolitan’s campaign works off the tagline “The power behind the pretty face.” Behind her back, the Cosmo Girl holds her collection of objects, remarkably similar to the signifying objects of the MS. woman: American Express gold card; make-up brushes; Pan Am World air travel card; Hertz Rent-a-Car card; compact disk (Mozart); portable sharp calculator; motorcycle helmet; scuba diving mask. Both MS. and Cosmopolitan represent their ‘woman’ as a consumer of objects: objects that symbolize the worth of emancipated women.

The Condé Nast package of women’s magazines in 1987 included Mademoiselle along with Vogue, Bride’s, Glamour and SELF. Like its competitors, Condé Nast sells women as active leisurers packaged in unabashedly commodity metaphors.
26 MILLION WOMEN IN A PACKAGE.
Critical Mass. 26 million high-gear women readers set wheels in motion, get ideas rolling. Their sources are Vogue, Glamour, Mademoiselle, Bride's and Self, the magazines of the most dynamic force in women's media, The Condé Nast Package of Women. To shift tastes. To drive sales curves uphill, get the particulars on The Condé Nast Women's Package, the Critical Mass (Advertising Age, March 7, 1988, inside cover).

In Condé Nast's commodified family of women, Mademoiselle is the magazine positioned for "Strong women with a weakness for fashion and beauty."

READING THE ADS IN MADEMOISELLE: ANYTHING GOES?

There are 150 separate ads larger than one-half page in the September 1987 issue. Collectively, the ads seem to be an ideological grab bag of commodity narratives extending from the predictable cosmetic ads featuring glamour and the allure of flawless beauty to the no-nonsense women who wear running shoes. Where else might we find, a mere two pages apart, Benetton's vision of a brightly-colored post-racist world, and a White Shoulders ad that has been running forever and features the epitome of white male patriarchal hegemony standing over a racist and elitist female aesthetic? Some Mademoiselle ads might be seen as bordering on the pornographic, pictorially representing woman as a pure or fetishized object of desire—for example, an ad for Borateem Bleach presents a woman dressed in a skintight red top and a leopard print miniskirt outfit, posed as a sultry siren who invites with indifference, as males hands reach to touch her. Next to this is a confusing tagline, "Play it safe," that seems diametrically opposed to pictorial codes of promiscuity. At the opposite end of the spectrum is a Joan Vass ad that features models who have assumed the characteristics of postmodern mannequins: they connote desire and narcissism gone numb. There can be no doubt that ads structured around the male gaze predominate in the September Mademoiselle—over half the ads either visually portray the male gaze or presume it as the motivation for consuming a product. The predominant version of the male gaze is typified by cosmetics ads that feature romance and the feminine quest for the perfect face. Of greater interest to us are the ideological variations on the male gaze: for example, the Nivea, professional-mom male gaze; the Hanes, girl's-just-want-to-have-fun male gaze; the Lawman, postfeminist gaze; the Get Used, you-want-it, I-got-it, get-screwed male gaze; the Nike, contested male gaze and the Joan Vass, dead gaze. In this section we have been particularly interested in how ads for the primary components of the female commodity self—the face, the breasts and the legs—position signifiers of feminism to modify the appearance and the meaning of the male gaze.

Whereas advertisers in the past structured ads to conceal the appearance of ideological contradictions, times have changed. There are even advertisers who now choose to make ideological contradiction their sign. To confuse further the ideological field, some advertisers now actively encourage multiple readings as they try to recapture the attention of alienated viewers by encoding messages that are ambiguous, incomplete or polyvalent (see Goldman & Papson, 1991). Even so, behind the apparent ideological randomness of the ads and the multitude of different voices with which they address viewers, lie the familiar guiding assumptions of commodity
consumption and a remarkable ideological regularity structured by the framework of ads. The ads are structured by recognizable frames and formats that obviously demarcate the advertising texts from one another and surrounding visual and written texts. Boxes and frames cordon off each self-enclosed message, differentiating it from other textual agendas and significations. Most important, the advertising framework supplies a set of interpretive rules for how to make sense of the encodings on the page (see Goldman, 1987; Williamson, 1978).

Reading ads presupposes what Williamson (1978) calls "appellation." By this she means that ads hail or name the viewer, inviting the viewer to enter the space of the advertisement. Consumer ads name the viewer through the mode of address, asking her to insert herself when the model fits. Then, seeing a potential self (you) in the mirror of the ad, she is invited to perform a critical interchange of meanings—exchanging self for the self-made-better-by-the-commodity in the photograph. Consider an ad for Nivea Visage Facial Nourishing Cream (pp. 172–173) with its caption "Is your face paying the price for success?" The viewer is named, but the query is situated adjacent to a photograph of a blond young woman in her mid 20s holding the hand of a female child on an urban sidewalk as she peers into her reflection in a glass window. Whose face?—there is no confusion if we interpret the model's presence as an imaginary substitution for ourselves.

This woman exemplifies what we spoke of before: her attire as a set of visual signifiers functions as a sign for feminism. Let's unwrap the relations signified by this photo. The child whose hand she holds, we presume to be her daughter. Her other hand holds a signifier of her professional rank and status—a briefcase. Drawing attention to the briefcase, the advertiser has visually masked whether she wears a ring. Though we may infer she is married, the centrality of a man in her life is left open and we might also infer that she is a single mother. And yet, the relationship with her daughter seems almost incidental, because her primary relationship is with herself as she looks at her reflection in a large store window. Her blouse, open at the neck, with a tailored, double breasted jacket and matching skirt suggest her to be a fashion-smart woman who has achieved professional success in a formerly male-dominated work world while also devoting herself to her family.

Despite reading the caption, most readers label this woman as pretty. Yet, we are told this penetrating self-examination in the mirrored store window represents the recognition and fear of losing her beauty to the "signs of premature aging and other effects of stress." The caption alludes to the real world where a woman has practiced the work ethic and suffered to gain success while balancing the demands of family: "You work hard at work, you work hard at home. You're under a lot of pressure." As a result however, she/you may be paying the price in diminished face value. The price of her success in the labor market may cost her what she values most—her beauty, because that is what values her to the market.

Perhaps she sees what a later Mademoiselle article calls "the look of stress," (September, 1987, p. 294) but she has already managed stylishly to wed together the worlds of mother and professional, and here is yet another commodity solution to her concern about maintaining her labor market value and her face value. Her priorities, values and status have changed, but there is an amazing similarity between this ad and 1920s ads aimed at women defined as housewives and
competitors in the marriage market. Now, as then, the emphasis is on insecurity and anxiety about how she looks as she surveys herself in the mirrored window. The advertiser set up this scenario about the anxiety of a diminished self in order to offer a commodity solution, in this case a special scientifically formulated skin cream. Indeed, we may now take another interpretive whack at the relationship between the caption and the picture. Perhaps this woman has already used the product, and despite her penetrating survey of herself, has withstood for another day the threat to her youth. She, and perhaps you, if you too use Nivea, remains pretty.

The Vanity Fair ad (p. 44) also appeared in the October 1987 issue of *Ms.* The product is a full-figure bra. In a scalloped frame around the photograph of an attractive young woman wearing/modeling the product is a string of words which, we are led to infer, represents her thoughts. Her interior monologue begins with a reference to “client meeting” followed by a question about what to wear for it. This implies that she is a professional. The male world of commerce and status forms a silent, but present, party to this dialogue. This is followed by a reference to Mom who had counseled that daughter’s fate lay in “big, ugly bras.” Here, Mom stands for a generation of mothers whose fatalistic and limited expectations can be contrasted to our own, more modern views. The proof lies in this Vanity Fair bra which contradicts mom’s traditional view with its “streamlined construction [which] hugs the body for absolute comfort, ideal support and freedom of movement.” Though each term supposedly describes the product line, each also conveniently refers to social ideals sought by today’s woman.

What a different message from that of Mom: you can have freedom of movement without suffering constraint. Unlike men, who have sought success through the formula of hard work and a willingness to endure discomfort, here is a woman who not only succeeds in a man’s world, but manages to retain a balance between work and leisure. You can be equally at home in the business world and in the sensuous, narcissistic appreciation of your own visual beauty.

We find it important to stress that, though ostensibly independent, the Vanity Fair woman continues to indulge the pleasure of her body/breasts. Women’s magazines have typically gauged femininity by pleasure as defined by the male gaze. Femininity as pleasure has been defined in terms of woman’s privileged access to her own sensual body, to touch and feel her own softness and smoothness, to luxuriate in her own sensuality. This derives from the frame of the male gaze which has historically premised interpretation of most pictures of women in magazines. Within the parameters of the male gaze, women’s pleasure symbolizes men’s leisure (Winship, 1987).

A two-page ad for Hanes pantyhose (pp. 244–245) defines the new woman with the tagline, “Anything Goes.” A brightly dressed, expressively glowing young woman sits on a park bench as she prepares to eat. Most of one leg is visible, framed by her short, white pleated skirt blown up on her thigh (a la Marilyn Monroe). Seated next to her on the bench is a doughty, elderly woman with her back turned toward us. The older woman is wrapped from head to foot in drab, lifeless clothing and an unstylish hat. The contrast in age, color and energy between the two women emphasizes intergenerational social change in female gender roles. In fact, a reference to class difference might also be inferred. Hanes narrative is based on
comparisons that divide women by generation and class: narrative based on the competitive ethic of male possessive individualism, and not the inclusive ethic of non–liberal feminism.

Stylistically, the young woman's body cant and attire connote "uninhibited personality." The text, "Anything Goes," refers both to this notion of personal, stylized independence and to her exposure of her body as a sexual territory. The longer caption is the Cole Porter lyric: "In older days a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking. Now heaven knows, anything goes." This reinforces the visual and structural frames of the ad. The romantic connotation associated with the Cole Porter lyric may mean that her exuberant display of herself might be for the purpose of heterosexual relations. And yet, despite this emphasis on modernity as style, and the display of high heels and legs, the model's apparent subjective focus is on the hamburger she prepares to eat. We must entertain the possibility that the appearance generated by her fashion display is, for her, its own reward. The latter reading is a possibility where the reader is presumed to be the spectator/owner of this image. But unlike the spectator-owner of an oil painting or a girlie magazine, this spectator-owner is a woman (see Berger, 1972).

COMMODITY DIFFERENCE: POSITIONING THE MEANING OF EMANCIPATION

Competition within some product categories—such as jeanswear—centers on the name-brand attempting to position feminism and femininity in a novel way. Diversity of commodity feminism is particularly evident when examining ads within a single product category.

A Lawman jeans ad (p. 215) instructs that "No one has the right to pressure you into anything that hurts your body, clouds your future, or robs you of your self respect." There is no submissive posture here, but a spirited young woman ready to become all that she can be. Positioning 'Lawman' as an agent of freedom, rather than as an agent of coercive containment seems paradoxical unless one shares in a Western mythology of 'lawman' as the champion of individual rights. Historically, the "Lawman" enforced the rules of a patriarchal state that often oppressed and subordinated women, whereas this lawman supposedly frees women's bodies and spirits.

The Lawman model is posed in a moment of liberation—literally leaping into an unalienated future—that represents the meaning of "your self respect." This picture joined to the list of inalienable rights sums up postfeminism—a generation of young women who take for granted the rights gained through the struggles of feminists. This humanist 'declaration of independence' depoliticizes these rights into individualized lifestyle options.

Get Used signify jeanswear for defiant young women who want to hit the streets to teach mom and dad a lesson (pp. 188–189). The words Bonwit Teller and Macy's in the bottom corner are familiar as upscale department stores. But the product is denim tops resembling prison workfarm uniforms. What meanings might readers derive from these poses as modified by the framing concept "Get Used?" Two presumably up-scale young women, apparently alienated, hanging around at night on the street is an independence of another sort—almost a feminized James Dean, brooding rebelliousness? Their appearance might be read as that of independent
young women. The black and white photography draws on the “new ad realism,” and in concert with the name, connotes an anti-fashion statement. Perhaps the girls’ rebellious posture represents a defiant anti-consumer statement—“Get Used”! Yet, the very nature of the ad repudiates such a claim.

“Get used” may connote the girls as sexual objects, or we might even infer they “get off” on the thrill of potential sexual violence? Yet, this would place the ad well outside the boundaries of conventional middle class morality. Such a reading also evokes risk, danger and vulnerability. Are these girls street—tough? Do they appear threatened or inviting? Coldly desirable and defiant or merely brooding? Are they posed for an absent male spectator/owner? Are these girls posed as passive recipients of males sexual desires or are they posed for their own pleasure? Why would an advertiser address young women with this imperative, one meaning of which is sexual abuse? This ad builds on ambiguity, letting viewers fill in their own solution to the riddle of this pun and its disconcerting context. There is an attention-getting shock value in naming the product “Get Used.” Is there also a semiotic reversal available in here: that by consuming Get Used jackets, you the consumer inoculate yourself against getting used? This is not inconsistent with one possible visual message—wearing “Get Used” might make you strong enough to stand cool and steady. You are sexually desirable, but with this commodity you can control your choices.

Different, but not too different, is a fourteen page black and white advertising spread for Guess jeans (pp. 278–291). Like most Guess ads, these are image dominated with no captions to steer the interpretive process. The photos in this sequence depict attractive young women as the objects of desire for a swarthy, seemingly wealthy older man. In one sense, this is a very grown up version of the Jordache Basics portrayal (pp. 28–29) showing a younger teen with her bare-chested teen hunk. She’s thinking, “My parents can’t stand Billy. Who cares?” Some might find the Guess ads sleazy because of the onlooking (dirty old) man and the young girls in detached, but sexually submissive postures. Yet, the girls face the camera with cold, indifferent and enigmatic stares which are polyvalent. Such photographic representations are ambivalent and contradictory because they aim at young women whose selves have been conditioned by capitalist and patriarchal relations—they seek simultaneously to be objects of desire and subjects in control of their social situation.

PHOTOGRAPHIC HYPERREALISM: DE-GLAMORIZATION AND NEO-FEMINISM

Advertisers used to differentiate themselves via their tagline themes; by 1987, they also positioned themselves by how they addressed viewers through photographic style about questions of what is real and authentic. Mademoiselle readers would likely have encountered Esprit ads before. Consumers know Esprit for its minimalist, no-frills advertising style featuring “real” people with diverse interests and lifestyles. Subject matter and photographic style appear simple and unpretentious. Espirt’s real—people campaign positioned the brand as one that joins with viewers in rejecting the usual advertising fictions about commodity selves. Their ads disclaim any link to pseudo—individuality—the premise in most advertising that a
woman can truly become herself by owning the mass-produced commodity in question.

Esprit stands out from the advertising clutter by the way they pose and position women on the page. Here (Mademoiselle, September 1987, pp. 134–137) the women's portraits are cropped to the middle of their foreheads, in sharp contrast with a Clairol ad on the preceding page that centers the models' face and hair on the page. Women in the Esprit ads also tend to use little makeup. In her full page photo, Ariel O'Donnell addresses us straightforwardly, her shoulders and head squared toward us. A simple blue workshirt accentuates this squared look, deemphasizing the line of her body. She is seated with her legs crossed, though we can see little of her from the waist down. Tiny print framed within a ⅛ inch black band lists Ariel's vital statistics:


On the next page, another picture and biographical blurb portrays Cara Schanche. Like Ariel, she is named and identified in individualist and non-conventional terms.


Cara is posed in a tighter closeup than Ariel. Her chin is level and her eyegaze straightforward. We see only a blue-jean-jacket collar and a make-up free face. All these things suggest naturalness. There is no place to hide here, as she—unflinchingly, maskless—confronts the camera. There is none of what Erving Goffman called facework. Her clothes don't define her, she defines her clothes. Joining together this meaning of ego strength with the image of the Esprit label immediately opposite her eyes valorizes the sign value of Esprit jeans.

Other Esprit ads convey similar "neo-feminist" themes—e.g., "successful, independent woman" or "future news anchorwoman and mother." Young women are pictured as achievers, not as stereotypical vacuous fashion models. They are obviously smart and not so self-involved that they are unconcerned with questions of social consciousness. As multi-dimensional personas, these real young women stress their non-stereotypic feminine roles, preferring instead the active pursuits previously associated with males. There is nothing delicate or dainty about them.

Opposite Ariel's photo is a white page with a beige Esprit canvas jeans tag angled across it. Likewise, at the bottom of the page the words "Esprit jeans" appear with the brandmark printing of "E". There seems to be no sales pitch here—the jeans are not the primary photographic focus, and only the sign appears opposite Ariel's portrait. And something else is missing too—the viewer has not been conventionally appalled.

The page facing Cara's picture has a black background and a predominating image of blue denim which appears as a sequence of grids. The top three-quarter's of the page is divided into twelve bordered blocks—each block equals one-sixteenth of the page. At top, we see the Esprit tag on the back of blue denim jeans. Like Cara, this photo of the jeans is in extreme closeup, permitting the viewer to see the rows of threads in the denim. But as we gaze at the texture of Esprit, we perceive an
apparent distortion in the way the blocks fit together. Nine of the blocks would be perfectly contiguous if the black rectangular grid lines had not been drawn through the photo. But box #4 is a different scale shot of a side pocket, and box #5 contains the front button. The sense of visual distortion is a function of sewing together back pocket, side pocket, and front button into a single flattened plane. Box #12 contains a wallet-size photo of Ariel's cropped face. Her presence is juxtaposed against the field of Esprit denim/product in which she is situated. Below Ariel's photo is a block of text under the heading:

Esprit Jeans—A Modern Concept
Because denim and jeanswear are such social equalizers today you don't necessarily need silks and satins to be elegant. Elegance is now, curiously enough, anti-fashion and anti-luxury. This new elegance has become a declassification process that puts what you can do—your style and abilities far ahead of what you can afford. Now you don't have to be rich to be elegant.

Esprit here raises—as it simultaneously obscures—questions of social class. Esprit ads self-consciously consider gender and class and suggest a de-classed new age where heroic young women are free to do "what you can do."

This ad presumes reader familiarity with both 'the meaning of Esprit' and the world of fashion advertising. Savvy readers who possess such intertextual familiarity, recognize Esprit's claim to stand for unembellished quality and value, and the corollary, an absence of pretense. So too, because their ads deviate from advertising conventions, Esprit can claim to stand for the interests of anti-fashion and anti-luxury. Esprit has established as its sign, what it is not.

Until the final wallet size photo of Ariel and the block of text below, the advertiser has avoided apppellating the reader in all the usual ways. But now at the end of this anti-ad ostensibly dedicated to social equalizing, the reader is finally named—and invited to insert herself for Ariel in the mirror-space in the field defined by Esprit jeans.

What the advertisement clearly does is thus signify, to represent to us, the object of desire. Since that object is the self, this means that, while ensnaring/creating the subject through his or her exchange of signs, the advertisement is actually feeding off that subject's own desire for coherence and meaning in her self. This is as it were the supply of power that drives the whole ad motor, and must be recognized as such (Williamson, 1978, p. 60).

Esprit has attempted to differentiate itself by inverting the usual juxtaposition between woman and product image so that the woman (Ariel) becomes a sign for the product/Esprit name. But this only has value for Esprit if, once named, the reader imaginatively inserts herself for Ariel.

In this inverted logic, a commodity, Esprit jeanswear, is portrayed as the agent of progressive social transformation. Esprit constitutes the framework (the sign-universe) within which "neo-feminism" exists—where you as a modern woman can a) transcend the constraints of patriarchy and choose to define yourself; b) smash the inegalitarian pretense of fashion and luxury; c) redefine elegance and style in terms of what you can do and not what money can buy. Neo-feminism sounds an awful lot like postfeminism.
COMMODITY ‘PLURALISM’ & THE CONTAINMENT OF DIFFERENCE

Williamson (1986) discusses ideology, mass culture and the position of women by focussing on the notion of difference. Mass culture is largely the terrain of hegemonic ideologies which contain difference or antagonism by constructing superficial semiotic polarities. Commodity culture, as represented in mass market women's magazines like Mademoiselle, offers the appearance of difference, validated in terms of pluralism or individual freedom of choice. The juncture between difference and individual freedom of choice is, we want to argue, articulated in the concept of style. Advertisements are commodity discourses that appropriate, (re)present and manage difference by relocating it within the field of commodity choices. In the texts of commodity culture, "... the only choice is to consume—everything from clothes and cooking to personalities and politics—and all are accorded equal importance" (Lee, 1989, p. 171).

The process of containing the ideological antagonism between feminism and femininity is driven by the imperative of keeping the commodity circulation process going. Turning the opposition between these philosophical worldviews into an array of commodity choices—each, presented as signifying styles or attitudes that women may choose to try on, wear, display, and even own—simultaneously disperses, fragments and flattens discursive exchanges about power and inequality. Femininity and feminism become presented as interchangeable alternatives when the logic of market segments and product differentiation generate permutations of the look that correspond to every possible packaging of the essence of femininity with the praxis of feminism. The emphasis on individual choice and action obscures the larger social and political—economic forces that lie behind these significations. This commodification of the difference between femininity and feminism leads to a totalizing relativism that Bordo (1991) calls "the view from everywhere": anything apparently goes. But because the pastiche that constitutes commodity feminism does so by collapsing difference into images (surfaces), this remains an idealized pseudo—tolerance.

The culture industry has sought to transform feminism into a manipulable set of semiotic markers—confidence and attitude—which bear the meanings of individual freedom and independence associated with feminism. Terms like "attitude" and "confidence" not only signal the individualistic orientation of Mademoiselle, they also represent what can be acquired through the right consumer choices. Magazines like Mademoiselle offer narrative after narrative about how best to present yourself as a set of signs. There is, of course, a kernel of social truth to this worldview: In the competitive labor market environment of corporate capitalism, you might want to make a statement that sets you apart. Commodity—sign differentiation is an imperative for women who seek to navigate successfully the currents of corporate labor markets.

Conventionally, femininity has been made synonymous with markers of home, love, sex, otherness and naturalness. Liberal feminism challenged this ideology by arguing that the tenets of possessive individualism must be applied regardless of gender. Every person has proprietary rights over her own body, over her own person or capacities, so that her freedom is the right to alienate her labor and the right to
alienate her body. Commodity feminism seizes upon this aspect of possessive individualism and turns it to fit the logic of consumption. Nonetheless, the majority of ads continue to address women in and about the language of beauty as defined by the male gaze. In this discourse, the supposed biological universalism of sexual difference overshadows class, race and ethnicity, and define women as not money, work, and power (Williamson, 1986). Commodity feminism appears, at first glance, to take possession of these domains which were previously declared out of bounds to women. Femininity as both a material and ideological category was once central to the reproduction of capitalist/patriarchal relations. In contrast, the new commodity blends of feminism define access to the realm of money, work and power as legitimate. But, paradoxically, the female body has become the mediating element between the constructed domains of femininity and feminism—the domestic sphere and the world of work. Commodity feminism declares that control and ownership over one’s body/face/self, accomplished through the right acquisitions, can maximize one’s value at both work and home. As far as corporate marketers are now concerned, this new freedom has become essential to the accumulation of capital—to reproducing the commodity form.

Though the body of woman is once again essential to the accumulation of capital, this may ironically be the price of undermining patriarchal hegemony. Setting up the female body as the locus of pleasure and desire may, in fact, fetishize women’s parts as objects of desire; but it also creates the possibility of revaluing women’s bodily pleasure, legitimating it in its own terms. The circuit of the male gaze has been repeated so often in women’s magazines that the gender of the surveyor is no longer necessarily fixed. Historically, “the surveyor of woman in herself [was] male: the surveyed female” (Berger, 1972, p. 47), but the construction of the audience as a commodity has given rise to a spectator position that is structurally and subjectively not—always—male (Stacey, 1989). When women viewers are hailed by ads and step into the mirror of the advertising image, they must also negotiate the gaze that addresses and positions them as objects of desire. Faced with recalcitrant or resistant viewers, advertisers have taken to modifying the male gaze. To disarm viewer resistance to a male gaze carrying meanings of submissiveness or subordination, advertisers have adopted more reflexive methods of positioning the viewer because if women withdraw their interpretive cooperation, they destabilize the sign-value production process. Williamson (1978, pp. 40–45) has persuasively argued that the meaning of ads depends on the viewer’s cooperation. Without a participating subject who enters the advertising space to complete the exchange of meanings, an ad cannot produce a sign that possesses value within a currency system. Perhaps it is on this contradictory cultural terrain made necessary by the conditions of continuous commodity consumption that the next chapters of the dialectic of female desire and pleasure will unfold.

NOTES

This process of depoliticizing and individuating feminist demands for greater autonomy and control is not new. Nancy Cott notes that in the 1920s an emerging consumer industry translated the rhetoric of feminism into the “consumerist concept of choice” based on packaging ‘the modern woman’ in commodity form (Cott, 1987, p. 172).
As Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) observed, "all reification is forgetting."

The images assembled in these trade journal ads mirror the uncertainty of those who work in advertising about how to speak effectively to audiences of women. Advertising "agencies and clients are having trouble appealing to women who work as well as to those who stay home. . . . The majority of women out there aren't neatly typecast, so it's very difficult to develop strategies to reach a large number of them" ("Despite less blatant sexism," 1985, p. 19)

"Cosmopolitan belongs to the Hears Group which also pushes "Woman Power" which it defined (Advertising Age, Nov 2, 1987, pp. 14-15) as "...bring[ing] together 53 million women. And joins the forces of the five best editorial staffs in the business. . . . Cosmopolitan, Good Housekeeping, Harper's Bazaar, Country Living and Redbook, all in one...what you can buy like one magazine is actually five of the most powerful editorial environments around."

While the ad acknowledges what Hochschild (1989) calls the "the second shift" there is no comparable magical solution to the dilemmas of the second shift in real life. Mademoiselle does offer supplemental editorial advice on "the management of stress, on how to cope with biological "stress chemicals" and women's apparently innate psychological "desire to be everything to everybody." Just as office problems are depoliticized through checklists of do's and don'ts, the "stress" of the "second shift" can be dissipated by following technocratically researched checklists of diet, exercise and intelligent consumption.

REFERENCES


